New York
Theatre Critics' Reviews
1954

Volume XV, Number 12 • Rachel W. Coffin, *Editor* • Week of October 18, 1954

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Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of October 18, 1954

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
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NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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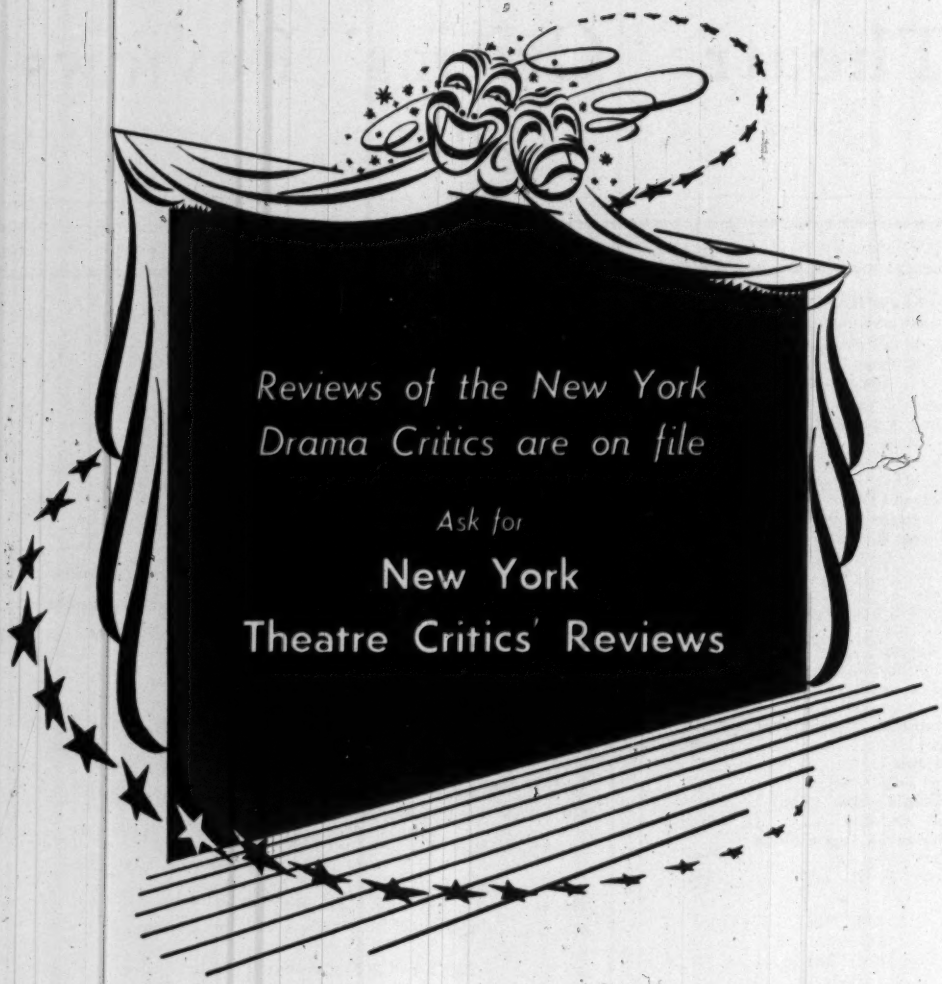
Yearly Subscription $25.00

Published by CRITICS' THEATRE REVIEWS, Inc., 235 East 22nd Street, New York 10, N. Y.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New York
Theatre Critics' Reviews

"Sing Me No Lullaby"

New York Post

October 15, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Drama of the Political Climate

There could hardly be a better-intended play than Robert Ardrey's "Sing Me No Lullaby," with which T. Edward Hambleton and Norris Houghton began their second season at the Phoenix Theater last night. In it, the author is striving with most obvious sincerity to probe into the unhealthy and hysterical political climate of America in the wake of the cold war. But it is unfortunately true that the best of intentions and the highest of motives are not enough in the drama, and the result of all the earnestness is very far from happy.

"Sing Me No Lullaby" is an effort to contemplate the effect on a small group of idealistic Middle Westerners of the fear and suspicion engendered by the atmosphere of the times, when the suspicion centers about a brilliant mathematician who had worked on the atom bomb. It is concerned with the terror of guilt by association with the suspected man, with the peril of suffering for beliefs held momentarily in an earlier and very different national climate, and the mistaken lengths to which people may be driven when suspicion is haunting them.

One Scene

In the process of pointing his moral, Mr. Ardrey does come up with one or two highly effective and chilling moments. The most striking is a scene in which two friends of the accused, who have complete conviction of his integrity, are questioned by a calm and objective man from the FBI, and suddenly find themselves making excuses for their own conduct and doing so at the expense of their old companion and even of each other. I thought it was a completely believable episode, as well as a frighteningly significant one.

On the whole, though, "Sing Me No Lullaby" seems to me remarkably clumsy playwriting, especially from a dramatist who, in the past, has shown so many signs of promising talent in his work for the theater. There are, for example, several flashback scenes, showing the people of the narrative at earlier points in their lives that were eventually to prove crucial, and I must admit that if Larry Gates, who has an important role, didn't don his toupe for the youthful episodes, I would have had difficulty discerning at once the period that was being enacted.

The Matriarch

Although the case of the mathematician is the central interest of the play, it is also preoccupied with the question of whether a rich young liberal should run for office, despite the political handicap of his beliefs, and of his conflict with his mother, a cynical matriarch who contributes to the opposition campaign. This section of the drama struck me as especially ineffective, but the sad truth is that very little of "Sing Me No Lullaby" works out successfully either in its dramatic power or in its consideration of the ideas involved.

Some competent performers do their best to breathe the proper life and conviction into the work. Richard Kiley as the young politician, Jessie Royce Landis as his mother, Beatrice Straight as his wife, Jack Warden and Marian Winters as the scientist and his wife, and Mr. Gates as the unstable friend make the most of roles that are not easy to manage, and John Marley handles his scene as the FBI man effectively. It is a melancholy fact that bad plays can be paved with the most idealistic intentions, and this is what happens in "Sing Me No Lullaby."

"SING ME NO LULLABY"

Play by Robert Ardrey; staged by Paul Stewart; setting by Ben Edwards; costumes by Alvin Colt; lighting by Klaus Holm; presented by T. Edward Hambleton and Norris Houghton at the Phoenix Theatre, October 14, 1954. The cast:

Christine Collinger.....Beatrice Straight
Ben Collinger....Richard Kiley
Mike Hertzog.....Jack Warden
Clay Dixon.....Larry Gates
Abe Levene.....Michael Lipton
Maddy Hertzog..Marian Winters
Fanny Collinger.....Jessie Royce Landis
Johnny Colton Smith.....John Fielder
Parrish.....John Marley

Journal-American

October 15, 1954

Play Muddled And Confusing

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE Phoenix Theatre opened their second season last night with a highly controversial little number called "Sing Me No Lullaby," by Robert Ardrey.

I do not happen to agree with much he has to say, but I respect his right to say it. I do not, however, respect the WAY he says it, for I found it a muddled effort all around.

It is the old story of the merciless persecution of an innocent American at the hands of the Federal gestapo.

In this latest edition we trace the careers of several young university students from 1938 to the present. This is done through a series of flashbacks, all taking place in the same Summer cottage in Sangamon County, Ill., near Lincoln's grave. (get it?)

Of principal concern are Richard Kiley, the son of a rich matriarch, and Jack Warden, whose father was killed in a strike at the coal mine. Through two acts, which hop back and forth through the years, we discover that Kiley has married Warden's beauteous girl friend and gone into politics; Warden has become a scientist and was last known to be working on a government atomic project out West.

But now they are all reunited in the Summer cottage, these and Larry Gates, another college chum who is now a public relations man in New York, summoned to aid Kiley in his campaign for congress.

The flashbacks were tough enough to follow, but now things get really confusing: it seems Kiley has always been a radio ham and the set is right where he left it 16 years before and in good working order. Warden asks him to call New Zealand, he wants to wish a friend Merry Christmas. But when they get the friend tuned-in Warden only mutters a few large numerals into the mike.

The next day, while Warden is out, an FBI man arrives and informs Kiley and Gates that the set is monitored; that their friend has been in touch with Communist agents in New Zealand.

Without going into more detail, and there's plenty of it, the truth finally emerges: Warden is not a Communist. He joined a front organization back in the times when it was not generally frowned upon, but when he was investigated in the atomic plant he refused to say he thought he was wrong in thinking what he did at the time.

For this he was dismissed; not only that but he hadn't been able to find work anywhere in the country, he was spied upon, he couldn't get charge accounts anywhere.

As the curtain is about to descend we hear Kiley vowing to run for Congress so that some day, maybe, all Americans will be free. And he's going to start right now, only a stone's throw from Lincoln's tombstone.

I enjoyed the performances of Larry Gates, Richard Kiley, Jessie Royce Landis, John Marley, Beatrice Straight, Jack Warden and Marian Winters, but I'd like them better in something else —almost anything.

Daily Mirror

October 15, 1954

'Sing Me No Lullaby' Opens At Phoenix Theatre

By ROBERT COLEMAN

The Constitution guarantees drama critics as well as people against cruel and inhuman punishment. But apparently some theatre managers have not read the Constitution, for on four occasions so far this season aisle sitters and those inside have been subjected to heat calculated to put anyone but Superman in a hospital.

* * *

YOU THINK it was hot in your home or on the street Thursday night? Well, it was nothing less than murder in the Phoenix Theatre, Second Ave. and 12th St. A rip-roaring Turkish bath must have been mild by comparison. As if that weren't enough, our good friends, T. Edward Hambleton and Norris Houghton, chose to compound the torture by preeming Robert Ardrey's "Sing Me No Lullaby."

Hambleton and Houghton are men of taste and intelligence. Their Phoenix Theatre offered four admirable productions last season: two revivals of the classics, a play that Broadway had never seen and a musical that set a new pattern for its kind! You must have gotten a little tired of reading our constant raves on what this worthy organization was doing to restore the drama to the high estate which it should occupy in our cultural scheme of things.

Houghton and Hambleton not only presented interesting and stimulating theatre fare, but presented it with stellar casts at popular prices. Four clicks in four times out would have been an amazing record for a veteran producer. But for managers working under handicaps and pioneering new fields, it was nothing less than magnificent.

WELL, THE HEAT wave must have gotten Hambleton and Houghton down, for there is no other explanation for their choice of Ardrey's primitive, episodic, inept and incoherent script about politics in Illinois. Tchaikovsky once described Wagner as a frustrated symphonic composer who insisted on doing operas. Thinking in this vein, we can only conclude that Ardrey is a frustrated playwright who should stick to novels. He typed an absorbing one for Random House last year.

But Houghton and Hambleton didn't have spots in front of their eyes when they cast Larry Gates, Richard Kiley, Jessie Royce Landis, John Marley, Beatrice Straight, Jack Warden and Marian Winters for the leads in their first fiasco. These are gifted troupers, worthy of a better fate—on or off Broadway.

We have always had a high regard for Paul Stewart as an actor and director, but his staging of "Sing Me No Lullaby" adds nothing to his or his associates' laurels. Stewart has turned in so many excellent jobs, however, that he—along with Hambleton and Houghton—must be forgiven for what we trust is a momentary lapse from grace.

THIS IS ONE of the most difficult notices we have had to pen in the last couple of dozen years. It is not pleasant to scold those whom you hold in esteem. In fact, it is rather disheartening to have to report that the Phoenix Theatre has for the nonce come a cropper. We hope that it will be taking the hurdles in stride the next time out.

Anyway, the evening was not without its compensation. The baked beef and wine kraut, the pancake with preiselberries and the impeccable service at Jan Mitchell's fabulous Luchow's atoned for an otherwise unprofitable downtown safari.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 15, 1954

'Sing Me No Lullaby' Opens at the Phoenix

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Deep at the core of "Sing Me No Lullabye" is an idea for a play that is timely, moving and ominously impressive. The new work at the Phoenix moves in concentric circles around this idea with such stubborn obscureness, that the strain of following it is exhausting.

Let us relate the main narrative quickly, which is more than the play does. A brilliant mathematician is put through the investigation routine by the government because he was party to Leftist causes in the early thirties.

This innocent and tragic figure is slowly but surely relieved of work, home and even the barest living. His last resort, his only plausible escape, comprises the modern section of the play.

For some misty reason he has decided to bet his future on the candidacy of an old friend for Congress. When the friend refuses to run, the mathematician sees his only future, at any cost, in a Russia for which he actually cares nothing.

In the end, after the mathematician has been explained, and not even by himself, the play completes its circle. Its real purpose, it appears, is to show this story acting on the potential politician and his wife.

If their story had been developed in a clear light, it might have been as timely and exciting as the other narrative. But the crisscross mixture of tales adds up to prime confusion.

The play has employed the services of several perfectly capable actors.

Jessie Royce Landis, playing a ruthless rich witch who controls the politics of Illinois, has a cool dignity.

Jack Warden is the victim of investigators, and brings more sincerity than excitement to the role that is unfortunately detailed in his absence. Richard Kiley is the man of integrity headed for politics.

Beatrice Straight is his wife, a woman whose chief activity is changing her mind. Marian Winters plays the victim's wife, in effective disconnected bits of scenes.

A Dependable, Accurate Source of Information of the American Theatre

NEW YORK

THEATRE CRITICS' REVIEWS

The New York Times
October 15, 1954

Theatre: Phoenix Opens New Season

'Sing Me No Lullaby' Is Group's First Play

By BROOKS ATKINSON

WAIT until the third act and Robert Ardrey has something stirring to say in "Sing Me No Lullaby," which opened at the Phoenix last evening. He has written a very complicated play about the spiritual malaise of America today.

During the first two acts it is absorbing, though puzzling. For Mr. Ardrey never makes a character or a situation simple if he can avoid it. By the time of his third act he has got all the convolutions out of his narrative and he writes with directness, perception and power. The third act of "Sing Me No Lullaby" constitutes the most forceful statement anyone has made in the theatre for ages.

●

This is the story of some Illinois college friends of 1938 who have a country reunion at Christmas of the present time. As students, most of them had what were known as progressive political ideas in 1938. One of them, a brilliant mathematician, placed his faith in Soviet Russia then. The Stalin-Hitler pact shook all that faith out of him in 1939.

By the present time he is one of the dispossessed. Because of his college political associations, no one will employ him, no one will rent him an apartment, no one will associate with him, no one will clear him, no one will adjudicate his case. Mr. Ardrey doesn't solve the problem. But the contribution he has made in the last act is a clear and perceptive statement of this nameless, formless situation and an estimation of what it is doing to America. "The United States is going down like a magnificent ship, but no one can find the leak," he says.

●

This is a sticky subject today. The "mass media" as they are called in scientific jargon, avoid it like the plague. After the fashion of some of the characters in "Sing Me No Lullaby," they see no percentage in sticking their necks out. But there is still enough freedom in the theatre, especially off-Broadway, for a writer to describe a political dilemma and take a stand for or against it vigorously.

Mr. Ardrey, author of "How to Get Tough About It," "Thunder Rock" and other plays, is a man of principle and taste. In "Sing Me No Lullaby" he has performed the function of a writer. He has found the words to describe something that is vague and elusive but ominous. And he has got far enough away from political recriminations to state it in terms of character and the life of the spirit. The first two acts of "Sing Me No Lullaby" are confusing. But the third act is straightforward and eloquent. Perhaps the whole play would make a deeper impression if Mr. Ardrey played the third act three times.

Although the play has flaws, the performance has none. Paul Stewart's direction is relaxed, temperate, honest and convincing. In the principal parts of some cautious liberals, Beatrice Straight and Richard Kiley are excellent. They make the parts normal and sincere without overstressing political attitudes. Jack Warden's reticent portrait of the doomed mathematician is equally plausible. Mr. Warden does not invite cheap sympathy for the mathematician's problems. As an affable friend of everyone concerned, Larry Gates is in good form; there is iron in the character as well as casual humor.

John Marley, as an intelligent F. B. I. agent; Marian Winters, as the highly wrought though loyal wife of the mathematician; Michael Lipton, as a Jewish college student with a sense of realities; John Fiedler, as a newspaper reporter—give good performances. Jessie Royce Landis is magnificent as an overbearing, cold-minded dowager who ages without losing strength.

●

The whole play takes place inside the living room of a summer cottage that has been well designed by Ben Edwards. "Sing Me No Lullaby," is interesting, good or bad, from the moment the curtain rises. But in the third act it gets organized and makes a stunning statement. This is one of the things the Phoenix Theatre is for.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
October 15, 1954

THEATER

'Sing Me No Lullaby'

By WALTER F. KERR

Nightmare World

IS IT quite enough to speak out for a cause? Isn't it also necessary to speak well?

In "Sing Me No Lullaby," which opened the downtown Phoenix' second season Thursday, playwright Robert Ardrey takes up a whole handful of the important issues of our time. Before he is through with them—long before—he has reduced them to the level of a tot's First Primer.

• • •

The Collingers, who have been living off a respectable law practice in Washington, come back to the family summer house near Springfield, Ill. (There is a stove that Abe Lincoln once spat on). Ben Collinger once ran for office in the state, was double-crossed by his reactionary mother, and is now embittered with politics of all shades.

Joining the young couple is one Mike Hertzog, a college chum who had been leftist in his salad days, who has fought with distinction during World War II, who has become (temporarily) a government chemist, and who is now in the claws of the FBI. Hertzog has been hounded out of chemistry, out of teaching, out of ditch-digging. Since he can no longer "possibly live in the United States," he is ready to run to Russia, though Russia is a country he now despises. The moral climate of the time here has left him no choice. When Ben Collinger discovers the air-tight box his friend is caught in, he decides to return, at whatever cost to himself, to politics.

• • •

The issue is a clear-cut one, certainly—in prospect at least—a dramatic one. The problem is contemporary, the outline sounds stimulating, the author's willingness to grapple with it is little short of heroic.

But he has chosen to thrash the matter out in some of the fuzziest rhetoric, and through some of the least lifelike characters, in recent socio-dramatic history. Beatrice Straight, a responsible actress, is required to slap her palm hard on that stove and announce that Abe spat on it, without—it's not quite possible—arousing the audience's more mirthful instincts. Richard Kiley, equally sober and industrious, is asked to chew on a pipe and mutter, "I want to talk about Santa Claus and a man called Abe and all the girls I never knew." On another peak on Darien, he must yearn toward the galleries and ask, "Why can't there be a high, high place where a man can feel free?"

In general, the author has siphoned his sizzling materials through a blanket of language, a blanket made up of "honor," "personal dignity," "private values," "the shock and mutations of this generation," "the times are larger than I am," and, for something a little more mundane, "What's the FBI doing here on Christmas Eve?"

• • •

Because his people talk like slightly muted sound trucks, it is also difficult to believe in what they do. Five or six good actors are eternally whirling upon one another, throwing open their arms, holding their heads high, and then standing firm. It's a lot like a game of statues, and when some one is asked to brew coffee, the suggestion seems wildly out of place.

Jessie Royce Landis, as the publisher-mother who has led a tough and lonely life, does make one moment leap into touching belief. When she rejects her son's sympathy as coming a lot too late, she is suddenly a person with some existence above and beyond the author's rhetoric. But the very effectiveness of the moment only makes it all the clearer that none of the others on stage have breathed a realistic breath all night. Mr. Ardrey has assembled some imposing thoughts in his summer house; but nobody lives here.

Jack Warden, Larry Gates, John Marley and—briefly and wastefully — Marian Winters work honorably under Paul Stewart's rather distant direction to illuminate the perfectly real problems of a troubled time. They are at great pains to override with sobriety one of the character's expostulations that "this sounds like a comic strip!" The trouble with "Sing Me No Lullaby" is that it is a serious comic strip, and there is no such thing.

"Sing Me No Lullaby"—*continued*

DAILY NEWS

October 15, 1954

Ho-o-o, Hum. 'Sing Me No Lullaby' Gropes Around Phoenix Theatre

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The Phoenix Theatre, which had an exciting and profitable time last season, has opened its second term on Second Ave. with an aggressively dull and epically inept drama by Robert Ardrey, "Sing Me No Lullaby." Jes' go see it, honeychile, and you don't need no lullaby.

There were good names in the cast at the opening last evening, but there was only one performance worthy of being called a performance in the professional theatre. This was Jessie Royce Landis' portrait of a wealthy woman whose hobby is politics, and my guess is that only the blind instinct of a real actress pulled her through, for her role is just as confused as any of the others.

She Could Spit

Take Beatrice Straight, for instance. Under Paul Stewart's direction, Miss Straight spends the evening moaning and groaning and rolling her eyes and holding her middle as though she has a gweat big tummy ache. She does make one lucid statement, of which there are few in the drama, when she exclaims, "A government snooper in my house on Christmas Eve? I could spit."

Drama of Protest

I have done my best to figure out what playwright Ardrey has in mind, and it would seem to be this: An idealistic college boy is quite a left-winger and an admirer of the Soviets up to the time of the Hitler alliance. And now, today, although he has done nothing provably subversive, he has been so hounded, pursued and investigated by the FBI that he can no longer keep a job. So he tries to escape this country and go over to the other side because he loves his wife and baby.

There is much more, of course, for "Sing Me No Lullaby" is a long play. There are flashbacks in which a group of elderly actors including Richard Kiley, Jack Warden and Larry Gates pretend to be college chums, class sweaters and all. These flashblacks are appalling. Marian Winters spends the evening weeping and trying to have a baby. This baby, which should weigh at least 19 pounds on arrival, turns up as such a lightweight that it has to be put in an incubator. The incubator is not shown.

Somewhat mystically, perhaps, Ardrey has set his drama in Sangamon County, Ill., close by the grave of Abraham Lincoln. I guess the playwright and the Phoenix Theatre figure "Sing Me No Lullaby" to be a drama of protest. Okay. Here's my protest.

"The Tender Trap"

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 14, 1954

'The Tender Trap' Bachelor's Dream

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The title of "The Tender Trap" refers to a beautiful young woman and a bachelor. The comedy at the Longacre is all in favor of marriage.

It is written by two men, oddly enough, because the final arguments are distinctly distaff. Up until then, the authors have unveiled an Aladdin's dream of the life of a single gent in the big city.

Ladies pursue him, bring him presents, clean up his apartment, and fight to kiss him like old-fashioned movie queens. The point of the play is to prove that this man is really very unhappy.

Much of the time the play is extremely funny, even on so hot a night as last. But it eventually dizzies you because its point of view revolves like the lamp in a lighthouse.

Motive Hidden.

Our hero is a king among dames, and they adore everything about him. Suddenly they all have to decide he is a stinker. If there is any motive for these lovely babes to turn into turncoatesses, it escapes me.

The unconvincing premise and argument are worth deploring because much of the conversation is so amusing, and lots of the performing is first rate.

Ronny Graham endows the principal figure with a lot of lightweight charm and gaiety. He has a true comic's way of planting and reaping laughs. But there is not a lot he can do to make this magnetic bachelor's downfall very convincing.

He is said to be 35. His idea of a big time is necking with schoolgirls and throwing parties that are "the greatest."

His behavior is collegiate, but honest. His friends are perfectly willing to join his fun, but sound pretty objectionable when they turn on him and condemn him for it.

Preston in Form.

Robert Preston turns his familiar trick of making a believable and likable character out of a not very interesting role. This time he is a husband and father who would turn back his pages, but only while he thinks he has struck gold.

Kim Hunter plays a violinist, written with odd contradictions. She is constantly described as being the most of everything desirable. She fiddles with Toscanini, and all the men worship her. Yet she is so hard up she is dying to marry this fribble-headed bachelor.

Janet Riley is pretty and winning as the determined title-role holder. Jack Manning is bright as her pursuer and boss. Joey Faye has the evening's biggest laugh in his brief scene as a hep cat.

Of all the people in "The Tender Trap" the only one I would really like to know in life is a wise, humane and cracked voiced doll played briefly and neatly by Parker McCormick.

"THE TENDER TRAP"

Comedy by Max Shulman and Robert Paul Smith; staged by Michael Gordon; setting and lighting by Paul Morrison; costumes by Anna Hill Johnstone; presented by Clinton Wilder at the Longacre Theatre, October 13, 1954. The cast:

Charlie Reader..Ronny Graham
Poppy Matson.....
Parker McCormick
Joe McCall.....Robert Preston
Jessica Collins.....Julia Meade
Sylvia Crewes.....Kim Hunter
Julie Gillis.....Janet Riley
Earl Lindquist....Jack Manning
Sol Schwartz.....Joey Faye

The New York Times
October 14, 1954

Shulman-Smith Comedy Opens at Longacre

By BROOKS ATKINSON

SO it was hot last night! "The Tender Trap," which opened at the Longacre, did not make the evening much more agreeable. The joint product of Max Shulman and Robert Paul Smith, it is a ready-made comedy about a New York bachelor who finally submits to matrimony.

Mr. Shulman and Mr. Smith start with some variations on that theme. Their bachelor is pursued by quite a flock of girls, one of whom is reputable. Somewhere on the fringes of their play there is also a married man from Indianapolis who thinks he has invented a pill to cure the common cold. Even the authors do not know what this side issue has to do with the main idea in their comedy. They put it out of mind until the last five minutes when they tie up their play with a bang and a kiss and let the audience go home.

•

Not every comedy has to be brilliant, imaginative, witty, original, audacious and uproarious. Things being as they are today, a pretty fresh comedy with an amiable sense of humor ought to be good enough for ordinary purposes. To many people happily wilting in the Longacre last evening, "The Tender Trap" seemed to meet those specifications, for they laughed consistently. They had the satisfaction at least of knowing that no one was trying to improve their minds.

Even to this more churlish department, "The Tender Trap" has assets. It begins with some amusing cock-eyed stuff about the problems of a New York bachelor who has learned how to avoid saying "no." It also employs a number of excellent actors. Robert Preston, a blustering, persuasive comedian, is always good company in the theatre, and a tower of strength in any faltering play.

Kim Hunter is a lovely, quick-witted actress who deserves a more triumphant part than "The Tender Trap" has given her. Although Ronny Graham has a wide grin and a willingness to be entertaining, he does not have much variety as a comedian yet. Neither does Joey Faye, but his slippery style of buffoonery does provide an acceptable change of pace in the last act. And Janet Riley, a streamlined blonde, is a fine thing to contemplate as the play scurries back and forth.

•

These are the sort of thing that gives "The Tender Trap" a promising appearance. But the quality of the merchandise is inferior. Mr. Shulman and Mr. Smith write with more desperation than humor. Paul Morrison has provided an excellent apartment setting. Anna Hill Johnstone has dressed the ladies extravagantly. In his stage direction Michael Gordon has kept the performance in an uproar.

There is a lot of noise and motion in "The Tender Trap." Not much entertainment, however.

Journal-American
October 14, 1954

Obvious Comedy

Play Slim and Repetitious

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE minute the curtain rose on "The Tender Trap," a new comedy which came to the Longacre Theatre last night, it was obvious what we were in for.

There was the young man wound around the young lady on the couch; there were the bottles and drinks; the doors leading to bedroom and kitchen, even the convertible sofa, in case a friend happened to drop in.

This was a bachelor's apartment in that most sinful of all cities, New York, and it was going to see lots of service before the evening was out.

For in the opinion of most of the young men writing modern metropolitan comedies a young man has only to take a short lease on an apartment in Manhattan and, before he can unpack, the doorbell starts ringing and a series of Copacabana girls stream in and out, bringing him gifts and asking only that he submit occasionally to their amorous advances.

True or false, this is the premise upon which Max Shulman and Robert Paul Smith have fashioned their play. Ronny Graham, the recipient of all this affection, is having a perfectly wonderful time with Parker McCormick (yes, a girl), Julia Meade, Kim Hunter and about a dozen others who are only identified over the phone.

These glorious creatures never carp or cavil—it is enough that lover boy will grant them an occasional moment on cloud seven.

Counter-Plot

Then, of course, along comes the Tender Trap, the delicious thing who falls for him but will only settle for marriage. End of situation; end of play.

Dropped in between the constant barrage of doors opening and closing and ringing phones there is a counter-plot. Robert Preston, from Graham's old home town, drops in to spend a couple of weeks. Preston is happily married, with children; the implication being that this is what would have happened to Graham also if he had not come to see naughtee citee. And the temptations of the town are such that Preston barely gets away before blowing his own marriage.

To me this is pretty thin stuff for a whole evening and is therefore repetitious much of the time. So everybody's mad about Ronny Graham? Okay, we don't have to be beaten to death with a blunt instrument—and the instrument is occasionally pretty unsharp.

The boys can write funny lines, but they seem to have trouble sustaining situation scenes to fulfillment: when in trouble, the doorbell rings.

Graham Good

Ronny Graham, in his first time out as a non-musical performer, manages to take most of the stigma off a character who is being endlessly kissed by a succession of dolls and proves, in addition, that he is a most ingratiating and competent comedian. His advertised charm seemed even to embarrass him at times.

Robert Preston is, well, Robert Preston. He is that same stolid character with jutting chin and the voice of authority, and of course he does it extremely well. He should, he's been doing it long enough.

Kim Hunter made a game effort to be one of Graham's girls, but I never believed it for a moment. She tried, but when she said in the last act she'd marry him because there wasn't anything better on the market, I almost reached for the fedora.

Parker McCormick, Julia Meade and, particularly, Janet Riley, were most effective as other fillies in the Graham stable; Jack Manning had a couple of good scenes as an irascible young scientist and Joey Faye rocked the joint in a last act bit.

Maybe the boys ought to write another one—only this time make the boy a girl.

New York Post

October 14, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

Short, Happy Life of a Bachelor

New York, the authors of "The Tender Trap" would have you believe, is the dream city for bachelors. In their new comedy, which opened last night at the Longacre Theater, Max Shulman and Robert Paul Smith report that Manhattan is teeming with beautiful, desirable and generous girls, who pursue the unattached male with their favors and are bent on bestowing upon him all kinds of thoughtful gifts, from Victrola records to whitefish. Life is for him one wild round of gayety. And he doesn't even have to phone these agreeably amorous beauties. They'll phone him.

Although, as a bachelor of some years' standing, I am inclined to suspect that their picture is rather too glowing, the Messrs. Shulman and Smith offer such a romantic account of our idyllic and triumphant existence that I hate to accuse them of exaggeration. I'll just say that they are perhaps a trifle too flattering to us. Anyway, they have incorporated their findings in quite a pleasant little comedy, which is slightly disorganized at times and doesn't always appear to know where it is going, but is frequently bright and amusing.

Matter of Doubt

Let it be said for them, too, that "The Tender Trap" is not a play that heads immediately toward an obvious conclusion. In some part due to the aforesaid disorganization, but also through intelligent guile, the authors have managed to provide considerable suspense as to how everything is going to turn out. Indeed, I must say that I was in a great deal of doubt as to what the relationship of the leading characters was going to be when the final curtain fell. It may be worth noting that two of the chief figures don't win anybody in the end.

I am still a little in the dark as to what point the two playwrights are trying to make, but, in the process, they manage to be inventive and entertaining about it. Anyway, it appears that one Joe McCall, a married man with two children, is pretty contemptuous of his bachelor pal, Charlie Reader, until he visits him in his New York apartment and finds that he is being pursued by four eager young women. He feels Charlie doesn't appreciate one of them, and apparently has some designs on her himself, but there is a trap for Charlie that Joe can't free him from.

Man in Couch

If you find my brief account of the plot fairly confusing, I'm willing to accept only a part of the blame. Some of it, I insist, is due to the authors, who strike me as more concerned with incidental humor and entertaining observation than with any hard-and-fast narrative. For example, there is the aftermath of a drinking party when, for some reason, a folding couch is opened and out falls Joey Faye, who had been spending the night there. It's the funniest entrance of the season, even if its connection with the story is fairly detached.

Among the virtues of the play is that it is well acted. Robert Preston, as the married man, and Ronny Graham, as the bachelor, are excellent, and so are Kim Hunter and Janet Riley, as two of the girls importantly involved in the activities. In smaller roles, Jack Manning, Julia Meade and Parker McCormick, who, by the way, is a woman, are extremely helpful. So, of course, is Mr. Faye. The humor of "The Tender Trap" comes by fits and starts, and it is by no means a consistent delight, but it's the closest thing to a satisfactory straight play that has so far arrived this season.

DAILY NEWS

October 14, 1954

'Tender Trap' an Enjoyable Farce About Women Wanting Bachelors

By JOHN CHAPMAN

"The Tender Trap," by Max Shulman and Robert Paul Smith, is a skillfully contrived and very enjoyable farce about a young man on the prowl for girls and girls a-hunting men. If the weather ever cools off and if director Michael Gordon trims it a bit here and there, it will play very briskly. At its first performance at the Longacre last evening, it was a test of endurance for both actors and audience, for there was no air conditioning—and I think everybody behaved quite gallantly on both sides of the footlights.

An extraordinarily amiable group of players are in "The Tender Trap." Ronnie Graham is a young bachelor-about-New York who lives an ideal life. He has an apartment with a terrace overlooking Queens Bridge and he doesn't have to stir out of it to do his prowling. The girls just come on up. They bring him presents of cheese and fish. They tidy up his place for him. Every Sunday morning the nicest of them all, Kim Hunter, comes up, clears the establishment and makes Ronnie's breakfast.

The Happy Life

This is a fabulous setup in the eyes of Robert Preston, an old neighbor from Indianapolis who drops in and stays three weeks while conducting some business involving the invention of a cold cure. Preston is an old married man with a wife and three kids back home. The wife has wall-to-wall carpeting, the kids have braces on their teeth and, all in all, Robert is a comfortably settled gent—until he gets involved in one of Ronnie's love affairs.

With girls coming and going all the time, the play keeps moving. It has enough funny situations, and something ever better—humor. For example, Graham, in one of his many flustered moments as he tries to juggle dates and dames, tries repeatedly to tie his four-in-hand with no luck. So he calls up Countess Mara on the phone and complains in a bellow that for fifteen bucks she could at least have sold him a tie that would tie.

Funny Sayings and Doings

Ronnie's girls are different types—but all ladies and all attractive. Miss Hunter is the wise and rueful type—a violinist who works for Toscanini but is beautiful enough to work for Spitalny. Janet Riley is her opposite—a fresh and lovely young miss with an iron will who is out for one thing, marriage. She is the one who finally springs her tender trap.

There are some other interesting dishes around. I wish I could have seen more of Miss Parker McCormick, for she strikes me as an individual comedienne. And there are a couple of other men—Jack Manning as a pugnacious little laboratory researcher and Joey Faye as a trombonist left over from a big drinking party.

It's up to Graham and Preston to carry most of the play, and they carry it well. They have funny things to say and do, and they time everything right—and last night's heat was a terrible test of timing. I think Gordon and the authors should get together soon and cut about twelve minutes out of the comedy, six of them in the last act. After all, a farce is no more than a farce, and the happiest thing to do is get it over quickly.

Daily Mirror

October 14, 1954

'The Tender Trap' Proves Real Laugh Champ

By ROBERT COLEMAN

"The Tender Trap," in our book, is a real laugh champ. The heat and humidity in the Longacre Theatre Wednesday night, when the air-conditioning plant became temperamental, were enough to send a weaker challenger for a long-run title down for the count. But this new comedy by Max Shulman and Robert Paul Smith triumphed in spite of adverse conditions.

The new arrival, at first glance, stacks up as shrewdly penned chuckle provoker. It makes no pretenses to literary quality or philosophical depth. But there's a lot of truth, when you start thinking it over, concealed beneath its shenanigans. It does have a viewpoint.

* * *

THIS CAN BE summed up as: every man falls in love with a girl, marries her and then discovers she has turned into a wife. After that first romantic fling come children, braces for their teeth and, usually, wall-to-wall carpeting for every room in the house. But when the chips are down and he's had a business setback, it's right comforting for a guy to know there's the little woman in his corner.

Joe McCall and Charlie Reader grew up together back in Indiana. Joe, the bright boy, became a successful chemist for a drug company, married and had a family. While Charlie, the dope, was consigned to the sales department in New York, a snazzy bachelor apartment and one beautiful doll after another.

Joe, bored with his reasonably happy domestic life, thought he had discovered a wonder drug and came East to cash in on it. After watching Charlie in action, he decided a fling was in order for himself. But when his cold cure proved a dud, it was back to his cozy fireside and loyal spouse. As for Charlie, he finally fell into the tender trap set by a pretty laboratory worker.

Producer Clinton Wilder has given the comedy an excellent production. There is an attractive setting by Paul Morrison and femme costumes by Anna Hill Johnstone that should catch the eye of the ladies. And Michael Gordon's direction capitalizes on all the script's values.

THE CAST? Perfectly swell. That smoothie, Robert Preston, turns in a terrific job as the husband with the roving eye. He not only cashes in on every laugh that comes his way, but adroitly sets up a lot of them for his colleagues. He knows what to do in the driver's seat, as have Donald Cook in "King of Hearts" and Richard Whorf in "The Fifth Season."

Ronny Graham, of the niteries and revues, is nothing less than hilarious as good-time Charlie, who puts up a whale of a battle against matrimony, only to be floored by a romantic uppercut. Kim Hunter, Janet Riley, Julia Meade, Jack Manning, Parker McCormick and Joey Faye are other expert instigators of robust merriment.

It's a pleasure to be trapped by such an ingratiating and amiable entertainment as "The Tender Trap." We recommend that you buy your tickets immediately, or you may have to wait a long while to enjoy it.

* * *

WW says: A Laff Lulu!

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**

October 14, 1954

THEATER

'The Tender Trap

By WALTER F. KERR

Busy Bachelor

AS I SEE it, nobody in the new play at the Longacre gets a break. Robert Preston almost has a fortyish fling with a female violinist but he trots off home to his badgering wife. Kim Hunter almost lands an available male but makes a chin-up exit, unescorted. And Ronny Graham and Janet Riley get each other.

It isn't that the two last-named players aren't personable enough people, taken by themselves. Mr. Graham is a breezy, beaming, jittery, multi-toothed specimen who does just fine so long as he has a vaudeville gimmick to tangle with. Throw him a dead fish to hold in dismay and his face warms up all the proper grimaces. Give him a sofa to neck on, beneath a headless black nude, and he wrestles in gymnastic joy. Hand him a hangover scene, and let him curl up like a cat on a straight-backed chair, and he'll clock off the appointed laughs.

* * *

Miss Riley is, as ingenues often are, very pretty. She is spirited, too, perfectly able to stamp her feet and hurl a handbag twenty or thirty paces. She has, furthermore, a fairly fetching habit of spragging the last word in each line into a petulant drawl. I can't think that Miss Riley would be intolerable under other circumstances.

* * *

But Max Shulman and Robert Paul Smith, who wrote "The Tender Trap," have curious notions about what makes the world — or at least the comic world — go round. In Mr. Graham they have offered us a casual Romeo (once "the clumsiest kid in Indianapolis") who finds that he has but to establish a bachelor apartment in New York to have hungry women battering at his door. So far so good, I suppose. But our lucky bachelor is a bit of a louse, too — as several women get around to telling him — and a couple of the scenes in which he brushes off the whimpering girls go just a bit cold-blooded, and just a bit greedy, for the shimmering comic spirit.

Something similar happens to the principal lass. She is a practical sort who has her life planned well in advance—F. Hugh Herbert has no copyright on this doll—and who has both a bicker and a bite to help her work things out. There is a whine in the role, and a snappishness of spirit, that cuts down its cuddlesome possibilities. You aren't rooting for this couple, one way or the other, very much.

* * *

In fact, if you care at all, you care for the luckless pair who sail out of Paul Morrison's characteristically moderne apartment without much hope in their separate futures. Kim Hunter is the disenchanted fiddler—she once played under Toscanini, but in the back row—and she eyes the evening's romantic mismatches with an attractively baleful glare. She is honestly appealing in her patient way, and she delivers a rundown on the bachelor girl's limited opportunities with crackling spirit.

And Robert Preston is his usual forthright self — why doesn't someone write a good play for his forthright self?—as a chemist who dreams he has cured the common cold and who dreads going back to his wall-to-wall carpeted home. When a pert young thing notifies Mr. Preston that she can tell he's married by just looking at him, his moral collapse is wonderful to behold. At all other times, he is efficient, inventive, and a help to the authors.

* * *

There are three additional helps: Joey Faye is rolled out from underneath an all-night sofa, trombone locked in his grip, for a splendid two-minute interlude; a redhead named Parker McCormick—called Poppy in the play—makes devastating use of a couple of enormous eyes and a voice like a creaking shutter; Jack Manning whips off his eyeglasses prepared to fight, and flails like a wheezing balloon.

But such fun as there is in "The Tender Trap" filters in from the edges. The authors may have intended a kind of rueful, perhaps autumnal, comedy, with all those wistful folk going it alone. But there's an itching edge of reality that dampens the nonsense, and, before the third act was done, I was tempted to go it alone myself.

"Fragile Fox"

DAILY NEWS

October 13, 1954

'Fragile Fox' a Realistic Thriller About Cowards & Heroes in War

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Fragile Fox is the walkie-talkie identification of an infantry company which, just when things are beginning to look easy toward the end of the Second German War, finds itself most dangerously involved in the Battle of the Bulge. The outfit's hazards are doubled, for in addition to combating the krauts, Fragile Fox must also contend with a captain who is a drunkard and a coward.

This sums up "Fragile Fox," which opened last evening at the Belasco Theatre. Written with candor and clarity by Norman A. Brooks and played by a hard-bitten crew of actors, it is a first-class wartime melodrama and should make a dandy movie. In fact, it plays like a movie on the stage, offering numerous excitements, vigorous characterizations and a slightly mystifying but very noble finale. It is not, however, the "Journey's End" of World War Two, for it does not probe very deeply into the thoughts of its stock characters.

Simple Melodrama

Taken as a simple melodrama, though, "Fragile Fox" is tiptop. Under the direction of Herbert Swope Jr. the action ranges swiftly from Fragile Fox's cellar headquarters somewhere in Belgium to a house in enemy territory which is briefly held by a handful of brave men. All the details look true and ring true—Ralph Alswang's sets, the men's uniforms and equipment, profane talk. Obviously, playwright Brooks knows what he is writing about.

What Brooks is writing about, mostly, is a cocky and overbearing captain who tipples on bonded bourbon and hides under beds when guns go off. Everybody hates him, but the two who hate him most are a couple of lieutenants, played with grim authority by Dane Clark and Don Taylor. Clark vows that he will kill the captain, but it is Taylor who finally has to do the job when his friend dies of wounds.

Enjoyable Realism

Andrew Duggan is excellent in the thankless role of the whisky-loving yellowbelly. Clark is in command of every scene in which he takes part. Taylor, also, is impressive, and there is a rousing, swaggering performance by James Gregory in the role of a swashbuckling lieutenant-colonel. There are several minor impersonations which are very good, including one by Crahan Denton in the stock role of a hillbilly sharpshooter.

If enjoyable realism is what you want, "Fragile Fox" is your play. But if you want something more than surface values, it isn't. Last evening I wanted something more.

"FRAGILE FOX"

Drama by Norman A. Brooks; staged by Herbert Swope Jr; setting and lighting by Ralph Alswang; presented by Paul Vroom in association with Bernard Straus at the Belasco Theatre, October 12, 1954. The cast:

Capt. Erskine Cooney..... Andrew Duggan
Cpl. Jackson..... Lionel Wilson
1st Lt. Joseph Costa..... Dane Clark
1st Lt. Harry Woodruff..... Don Taylor
Lt. Col. Clyde Bartleff..... James Gregory
Pfc. Bernstein.... Clem Fowler
Pfc. Snowden... Jason Wingreen
Tech. Sgt. Tolliver..... Crahan Denton
Capt. Gerstad.... Addison Powell
Pfc. Herman Ricks..... Richard Carlyle
Pvt. Jacob Abramowitz..... William Hellinger
Tall German..... Eugene Smith
Short German..... Leonard Bell
Private Sneider..... Robert McQueeney

New York Post

October 13, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Drama About Americans at War

The earlier World War provided the theater with two fine plays in "What Price Glory" and "Journey's End." The more recent global struggle so far has given us just one in Harry Brown's singularly underrated and neglected drama called "A Sound of Hunting." Nothing that took place at the Belasco last night, where "Fragile Fox," a work by Norman A. Brooks about the Battle of the Bulge, was being presented, tended to destroy the belatedly growing critical impression that Mr. Brown's play was a creative achievement of unique importance and stature.

"Fragile Fox" has all the trappings of the modern play concerning men at war. It has an all-male cast. It deals with what happens to human beings under the stress of combat, rather than with the romantic aspects of daring and heroism that were once regarded as having to do with battle in the theatrical imagination. Its action and its dialogue are tough and salty, and it has the scorn for officers and the admiration for the modest and unostentatious bravery of the enlisted man that are the characteristic traits of the war writing of today.

The Motions

The only trouble is that, with all these trappings present and accounted for, the author has nothing in particular to say. The officers and men go through all the motions of fighting among themselves, talking about sex, indulging in private feuds that are more bitter than their feeling concerning the enemy, sounding off against cowardice and incompetence, and taking a few potshots at the Nazis, but there is no particular point in what takes place. As a journalistic report, everything is sound enough, but there is little creative imagination involved.

As accurate as the reporting may be, and as realistic as the speech is, it all comes out in cliches of writing and drama. I doubt if there is a speech or an episode that has anything fresh or striking to offer. One of the officers is, of course, a coward and a bully, but, instead of doing something to explain him or make him seem an understandable, if detestable, human being, Mr. Brooks seems satisfied to present him as a theatrical villain. He belongs to the old-fashioned drama, even though the play tries to be something else.

The Virtues

It is only right to add that "Fragile Fox," which, by the way, is a code expression for the military operations involved, isn't as bad a play as all of this would seem to imply. It has individual scenes of dramatic interest, and it is a sincere effort to capture the thoughts and emotions of modern civilians unwillingly turned soldiers. The idea of death and destruction returning just as the war seems successfully ended is ironically effective. But nothing occurs to turn the author's material into a powerful, impressive or provocative drama.

Whatever may be said against it, this is the sort of thing American actors know how to do. There is a rugged honesty in the playing, particularly in the work of Don Taylor as a decent young officer, Dane Clark as a straightforward soldier, James Gregory as an unlikeable Colonel, Andrew Duggan as the villain and Crahan Denton as the inevitable Southerner in the company, and they frequently give the play a vitality that is sorely needed. In the end, though, "Fragile Fox" is unhappily lacking in point and dramatic forcefulness.

The New York Times
October 13, 1954

'Fragile Fox' Opens at the Belasco

By BROOKS ATKINSON

NORMAN BROOKS' "Fragile Fox," which opened at the Belasco last evening, is a slice of life that looks like a play. It is the story of a combat captain who welshes on his men during a tight squeeze in Belgium in the last year of World War II. After he has sacrificed enough of them to make his lack of character clear, his second-in-command kills him to save those who are left.

This may not be a literal record of something Mr. Brooks personally observed during the war in Europe. But the play is said to be based on an episode that he knew about. And "Fragile Fox" demonstrates something in the theatre that never ceases to be astonishing: Plays made directly from life smell strongly of the theatre. Poetic plays of equivalent quality look more realistic than plays that report life realistically.

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There is no reason to doubt any of the facts Mr. Brooks sets down as the basic elements of his play. Captain Cooney's cowardice, dipsomania and lack of scruple are probably not exaggerated. Very likely, he is entirely responsible for the deaths of some of his men whom he left unprotected in a perilous position. There is no doubt that he goes back on his word to Lieutenant Costa, whom he leaves without support in an impossible position. No one blames Lieutenant Woodruff for shooting Captain Cooney in another desperate moment, and no one blames Colonel Bartlett for preferring to look the other way. All this is probably based on realities.

But they seem like crudely contrived drama in the theatre, and they never ring true. "Fragile Fox" has all the staples in the proper places: booze obscenity, jokes about the unfairness of war, sounds of shelling and machine-gun fire, captured Krauts, bad food, dead bodies, wounds and a conspicuous absence of women. There is even a demonstration of how to set a broken leg at the front. While Mr. Brooks is telling his story, he sketches in the background of the typical war play, inadvertently proving the platitude that wars are boring.

Nothing Herbert Swope Jr. has done in the direction redeems "Fragile Fox" from the looseness and the commonplaceness of the writing. And Ralph Alswang's sets of war-battered buildings are routine in design and construction.

The acting is as satisfactory as usual, compounded of tough talking, sardonic wise-cracking and coarse military behavior. Andrew Duggan as the cowardly captain, Dane Clark and Don Taylor as rebellious lieutenants, James Gregory as a conniving colonel and all the other actors, too, give acceptable performances.

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This column, which is skeptical of the work as a whole, took a particular liking to Crahan Denton. Playing a technical sergeant with a Southern accent, Mr. Denton looks and behaves like a Bill Mauldin drawing. "Fragile Fox" suddenly comes to life and seems real when Mr. Denton starts soldiering. Why is that? Why does his acting in a minor role seem more genuine than the play or the rest of the performance?

Journal American
October 13, 1954

Strong Drama of Front Lines

By JOHN McCLAIN

IT IS difficult to bring the illusion of front-line warfare to the stage. There have been successful shows dealing with prison camps, air fields, behind-the-lines brass, and the other less noisy aspects of a war. Theatrical producers probably felt such efforts could be better handled on the Hollywood back lots with real tanks and guns and thousands of extras.

But not Paul Vroom, who brought into the Belasco Theatre last night a new play by Norman A. Brooks. "Fragile Fox," a rather delicate title for such a strenuous drama, not only gets you into the front lines—it gets you behind them.

It gives you a raw and compelling picture of the violence and terror and humor of combat; it is written with strength and understanding, and performed by a brilliant all-male cast. It becomes slightly muddled toward the end, and it will certainly not appeal to all audiences, but I think it is a notable play.

Bitter Hatred

The emotional drive of the story involves four men in a regiment stationed in Belgium in the last Winter of World War II—the Lieut. Colonel Commanding, a company Captain, his executive officer and a platoon commander.

In their last action the Captain had failed to come to rescue of a stranded platoon, which was wiped out, and this act of apparent cowardice has driven the remaining platoon leader to a state of murderous hatred against his superior. But the Captain is secure in his home-town hold over the Regimental commander; it seems his father had brought the Colonel up to a position of political authority in the State.

When the Germans break through at the Bulge the company is ordered forward once again, to take a small town up the road. Here the Captain takes to the bottle and his terror takes command. He orders the remaining platoon forward, while he holds the rest of the company in reserve.

Excellent Play and Cast

As they leave, the leader threatens that if they meet opposition and are not rescued he will come back, somehow, and kill the Captain.

It is at this point that the shootin' War comes to the Belasco and remains for an hour or more. There is the action in the small town, the sudden transition from boredom to fright, the comedy springing from taut nerves. There is also a very real facsimile of bloodshed and death.

And, finally, the inevitable show-down with the Captain and Colonel.

Mr. Brooks has managed to interpret the talk, the manners and morals of the fighting GI with accuracy and, within reasonable limits, good taste. (I wouldn't take Aunt Ella or the kids, but I don't think they'd understand it anyway).

If the story stumbles at times in the last act, it is probably because of the author's determination not to leave any loose ends visible—a lofty though sometimes tedious ambition.

Dane Clark and Don Taylor share top honors as the bitter and vengeful platoon commander, and the forceful and understanding company exec. Both are required to shout themselves hoarse throughout most of the proceedings, but under the circumstances it seems natural enough.

James Gregory is a dominant and swaggering regimental C.O. and Andrew Duggan, as the cowardly Captain, is excellent.

Other highly meritorious performances were delivered by Richard Carlyle, Crahan Denton, Clem Fowler, Jason Wingreen, Lionel Wilson and Addison Powell.

Ralph Alswang, responsible for the war-torn sets, deserves a regimental citation; and Herbert Swope Jr., making his first foray as a Broadway director, should be similarly honored for moving his men with agility and competence, while under enemy fire.

You've got to like war plays—if you do, this is a good one.

New York World-Telegram
and
The ~~Evening~~ Sun

October 13, 1954

'Fragile Fox' Offers Crackling War Saga

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The Belasco has a crackling melodrama in "Fragile Fox." It is full of shooting and shouting, the most intense conflict and a great many slick plot twists.

This saga of a beleaguered platoon has a heroic flourish which suggests a historic novel more than it does most World War II fiction. It deals up the widely familiar situation of the battle command of a cowardly weakling, whose position is advantageous to certain other people, if not at all to the men under him.

The idea has been studied with more dignity and insight. But "Fragile Fox" is never pretentious until its final scene. Even this could be played less ponderously, hence more in keeping with the rest of the play.

We are met with a colonel who is an ambitious politician at home. He defends a cowardly captain, whose father is influential enough to help his future career.

The lieutenants are not so favorably inclined toward the captain, who has sacrificed their men in the past, and tries to do so again in the course of the play.

Eventually, after several near misses, the liquor-soaked coward gets his, from his own team. This again suggests a number of familiar accusations. In this case the executioner is put on the spot by a blackmailing superior. He has to forfeit the protection his men have given him, or give up his own honor by agreeing to posthumously honor the man he shot.

This involves a lot of story telling, and it is neatly done. Where the author, Norman Brooks, has not worked so craftily is in the development of character. The men are little more than puppets of the story. This is fair enough for melodrama, except that it leaves the author holding the bag in the end. There his moral arguments and confessions have a trumped-up sound.

Coincidence is perfectly at home in this sort of narrative. But plot twists sometimes ignore facts which a moment before have been accepted as incontrovertible proof.

Dane Clark is chief pacesetter in the swift saga, and plays with unremitting intensity that can electrify such a story. Don Taylor is a more balanced officer, who keeps his head when all about him, etc., but goes noble with misty prospects in the end.

James Gregory plays the jovially wicked politician with a lot of strength and legitimate good humor, and Andrew Duggan is effectively unpleasant as the swilling coward.

None of these roles is conceived with much originality of detail. The shorter parts sometimes have more life of their own, and they are as excellently played.

There is a lot of drama in Ralph Alswang's harsh pictorial sets, and director Herbert Swope Jr. gives the play a taut ride for its money.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

October 13, 1954

THEATER

'Fragile Fox'

By WALTER F. KERR

Shooting War

I AM a pushover for guns going off in the theater, and a lot of them go off with a lively crackle in "The Fragile Fox." Norman Brooks, author of the new war-time melodrama at the Belasco, has a fine old-fashioned feeling for what an audience will take in the way of suspense. He is able to dump a handful of men in a shelled-out hotspot and have them go to work on a sniper with tingling effect. He is able to cook up an onstage tussle—there are five or six of them before the last curtain falls—without telegraphing the feeling that the battle is rigged. He writes grandstand scenes with a surprising relish: characters bash in doors, stagger down stairways, and lunge in a dozen directions with great abandon—and with unexpected conviction. In this tame day and age of ours, this isn't a talent to be lightly dismissed.

Mr. Brooks' play does have, however, one great big hold in its head. The story has to do with an embittered American unit trapped in Belgium during World War II, presumably just about the time of the Battle of the Bulge. The outfit is run by a Capt. Cooney, who intends to go home safely and proceed to buy up the state he lives in, and a Lieut. Col. Bartlett, who means to become its Governor. They are, as one of their victims remarks, quite "a vaudeville team." To make things hotter, Cooney is a coward who has been wasting the lives of his men.

The men are, understandably, in a fine fury. One of them is ready to put a slug through Cooney before the first act is done. (He gets two unsuccessful tries at it, later.) Another, a level-headed sort, holds off for three acts and then decides that murder is the only reasonable solution. Between times, the trembling, hard-drinking Captain invites the whole-hearted loathing, and the open defiance, of every G. I. in the place.

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But the Captain is only a cartoon, really just part of a "vaudeville team." His cowardice is all too roughly sketched in, his 'country boy' lingo too close to a dialect story, for honest belief. He huddles under timbers when the shelling starts, he hoists a bottle to his lips with shaking hands, he moans on a cot that he "just can't help" being himself, but he hasn't the stature or complexity or authority as a human being to be the focal point of so much venom. The venom turns comic, as a result, all too often: the men seem to be taking potshots at an empty paper bag: the storm of violence that is stirred up has no center.

The soldiers who do the hating are very well played. Dane Clark is seen as the principal hothead, a First Lieutenant with a passion for protecting his unit. Mr. Clark enters with a seething contempt and an insolent stare; he turns an apology into a compounded insult; he stretches his mouth taut and his fingers tense as he whiplashes tension into his every scene. Whether you believe in the evening's villains or not, you can't help believing in this actor's breathless, staccato firebrand.

Don Taylor, in the less vigorous role of an even-tempered but understanding subordinate, is entirely plausible as he struggles to keep the outfit on keel. In lesser roles, Richard Carlyle is engaging as an innocent who can't get it into his head that he is somebody's enemy; Crahan Denton is effortlessly amusing as a homespun Sergeant with a talent for smoking out snipers; and Clem Fowler has an appealing moment as he realizes, under fire, that he may not be missed.

* * *

To Andrew Duggan and James Gregory falls the task of injecting some life into the two-dimensional scoundrels who do all the damage. By hefting his belt and speaking in what amounts to a running belch, Mr. Gregory rides over the caricature with some success. But Mr. Duggan is licked, forced to shake and to shout without much honest cause in the lines. Herbert Swope jr. has directed with a keen instinct for keeping things going, and his physical uproars are always in firm control.

"The Fragile Fox" has a good many of the merits of unabashed melodrama. But its facade of seriousness cracks, the victim of some villainous buffoons.

Daily Mirror

October 13, 1954

'Fragile Fox' at Belasco Is Tough War Drama

By ROBERT COLEMAN

"Fragile Fox," which Paul Vroom and Bernard Straus brought to the Belasco Theatre Tuesday evening, is a tough drama about tough-talking GIs in World War II. Norman A. Brooks has penned it with an eye for accurate characterization and an ear for authentic dialogue.

In its own right, it is an action-packed, hard-driving play, well written and compellingly acted. The only trouble, where popular appeal is concerned, is that it follows too closely in the footsteps of other war scripts. Its materials are familiar and somewhat shopworn.

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BROOKS IS CONCERNED with politics in the Army. Col. Bartlett, who has ambitions to be Governor of his state at conflict's end, coddles weakling Capt. Cooney because the latter's father controls a lot of votes back home. This results in severe and unnecessary casualties for Cooney's company.

During the lulls, Cooney is a swaggering braggart, but under fire a trembling and indecisive coward. Even whisky doesn't supply him with enough false courage for effective combat duty. When he attempts to surrender a post he has been ordered to hold, a subordinate shoots him.

Col. Bartlett cynically accepts a current story that the captain was killed by the enemy, and plans to cite him for a medal. But conscientious Lt. Woodruff, former college instructor, refuses to play ball, and turns himself in. As for what happens after that, you have to draw your own conclusions.

Director Herbert Swope, Jr., has given a fine cast its head, and gotten a dynamic performance. He drives the story relentlessly and inexorably to its climax and conclusion.

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DANE CLARK IS excellent as an irate young officer who would take direct action to end his captain's mistakes. No less excellent are Don Taylor, who does put an end to the cowardly bully; James Gregory, as the blustering, determined and cunning colonel; and Andrew Duggan as the craven company commander.

Salutes also must go to Lionel Wilson, Clem Fowler, Jason Wingreen, Crahan Denton, Addison Powell and Richard Carlyle in other roles.

"Fragile Fox," by the way, takes its name from a regimental walkie-talkie code signal, though we thought at first it might be descriptive of the scheming and weak-nerved Capt. Cooney.

With America again building a mighty and able Army to prevent further aggression in the world, we seriously doubt the wisdom of producing "Fragile Fox." It most certainly will do nothing to bolster morale, and it may alarm parents whose sons are in service.

THERE ARE THOSE, however, who might argue that such a script may help to eliminate the handful of Capt. Cooneys. And the author has every right to contend that he was just fashioning a rip-roaring melodrama which, of necessity, must have a villain as well as heroes. Perhaps we have taken the play a bit too seriously, but these are parlous times.

Anyway, we don't think you will see more forceful, robust and capable acting the length of Broadway. But we feel it's been wasted on a play of dubious box-office appeal.

"On Your Toes"

The New York Times

October 12, 1954

Theatre: 'On Your Toes'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

EIGHTEEN years is a trifle old for "On Your Toes." The revival, which opened at the Forty-sixth Street last evening, serves to remind us of some of the facts of life. All of us remember that "On Your Toes" has a celebrated ballet, called "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue."

But most of us had mercifully forgotten that it also has a book. The book is the work of Richard Rodgers, Larry Hart and George Abbott; and it goes on at great length in a style that "The Boy Friend" is currently satirizing. When "Pal Joey" was revived a few seasons ago, the book seemed closer to the mood of the day than it had been originally. But the book of "On Your Toes" is labored, mechanical and verbose. The mood of the day has passed beyond it.

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That is a pity. For every Broadway musical show includes an abundance of talent and represents a long period of hard work. The current version of "On Your Toes" is no exception. Mr. Abbott has staged it with pace and versatility. With expansive settings by Oliver Smith and carnival costumes by Irene Sharaff, it looks smart, vital and contemporary.

George Balanchine, the choreographer of the original production, has fitted it to spirited dances that suit Broadway without blurring the signature of their composer. "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue," macabre and garish, is as stunning as it was originally. Bobby Van may not have Ray Bolger's bounce and insane fury. But he is an extraordinarily able dancer and a thoroughly agreeable performer; and Zorina, of course, is expert, light, elastic and full of personality. Wait until the final fifteen or twenty minutes, and "On Your Toes" is as sharp and distinguished as it was eighteen years ago.

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Not everything in the score may be worth reviving. But most of it is original and exhilarating, and most of Mr. Hart's easy, saucy rhymes are off the theatre's top shelf. Both the music and the lyrics for "The 3 B's" are superbly civilized work. "It's Got To Be Love" is an exultant singing number. "There's a Small Hotel" has a happy flavor; and "The Heart Is Quicker Than the Eye" sung with great relish by Elaine Stritch, is an ideal Broadway ballad—anti-romantic and leering.

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There is a lot of excellent material in "On Your Toes," and the performance is flawless. Is a book, then, a matter of crucial importance? After all, it has only a utilitarian function in the making of musical comedies. Alas, there is no escaping the pedestrianism of this old-fashioned book with its musty jests about the egotism and voracity of a Russian ballerina, the temperamental bounce of a ballet company, the naiveté of an artless young American, the contrasting of sweet love and Old World passion and fiddle-faddle in general.

In due course, the book leads to the pagan excitement of "Slaughter On Tenth Avenue." But the course is long and enervating.

"ON YOUR TOES"

Musical comedy with music by Richard Rodgers; lyrics by Lorenz Hart; book by Rodgers and Hart and George Abbott; dances by George Balanchine; settings by Oliver Smith; costumes by Irene Sharaff; lighting by Peggy Clark; staged and revived by Mr. Abbott at the 46th Street Theatre, October 11, 1954. The cast:

Phil Dolan 2d....Jack Williams
Lil Dolan.....Eleanor Williams
Phil Dolan 3d....David Winters
Stage manager...George Church
Lola.....Dorene Kilmer
Junior.....Bobby Van
Frankie Frayne....Kay Coulter
Sidney Cohn.....Joshua Shelley
Vera Barnova.....Vera Zorina
Anushka.....Patricia Wilkes
Peggy Porterfield..Elaine Stritch
Sergei Alexandrovitch..Ben Astar
Konstantine Morrosine.....
Nicolas Orloff
Snoopy.....John Robb
Thug.....Nathaniel Frey
Mishka.....Patrick Welch
Ivan.....John Nola
Vassilli.....Edward Pfeiffer
Dmitri.....Ted Adkins
Leo.....Robert Lindgren
Ballet stage manager.....
Bertram Wood
Cop.....Arthur Grahl

Daily Mirror

October 12, 1954

'On Your Toes' Shows Its Age at 46th St. Theatre

By ROBERT COLEMAN

There's no use talking, times have changed. And so have our musical comedies. This was brought home to us Monday evening as we caught George Abbott's revival of "On Your Toes" at the 46th St. Theatre. The score by Richard Rodgers and the lyrics by Lorenz Hart are still wonderful.

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BUT THE BOOK by Rodgers, Hart and Abbott shows its years. It was penned back when some ballet impressarios got the idea that the classics were stodgy and dated, that what the dance public really wanted was jazz and novelty. Now the cycle has come full circle. Balletomanes pack the Met for the full-length masterworks.

That's probably why choreographer George Balanchine's satire on "Scherezade," which once seemed so hilarious, just doesn't ring the bell any more. But his "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue," which used to garner pages of text and photographs in smart magazines, still has enough vitality to start an audience cheering.

The story comes over as skimpy and rather primitive. It has to do, as you may recall, with the scion of a vaudeville dynasty, who becomes a highbrow music teacher and then atavistically returns to pop show business as jazz dance advisor to a ballet company pioneering new paths.

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OF COURSE, he has to go off his rocker over a glamorous ballerina, save the day by replacing a temperamental star, almost lose his life at the hands of a prohibition mobster, and eventually recapture the love of a nice little girl with modern ideas. Maestro Abbott has wisely emphasized the songs and dances at the expense of the limping libretto. And two-dimensional characters.

He has also signed skillful and ingratiating performers for the leads. Vera Zorina, who starred in the English facsimile of "On Your Toes" some seasons ago, is a beautiful, shapely and tempestuous ballerina.

Bobby Van, who looks a lot like the Ray Bolger of the original "On Your Toes," is an Abbott find. This likable youngster handles a song well, acts agreeably and dances like a whiz. He definitely has all it takes for the big time. Ben Astar, an excellent character actor; Nicolas Orloff, a first-rate character danseur; cute Kay Coulter, Joshua Shelley and George Church do well by mediocre material.

BUT IT WAS dynamic Elaine Stritch who really electrified the first nighters as a cynical patroness of the arts. She made her role seem funnier than it really is.

The customers came to the 46th St. Theatre in a nostalgic mood. As conductor Salvatore dell'Isola's orchestra played Don Walker's clever overture, they broke into spontaneous applause as they recognized familiar and unforgettable melodies.

They relished such pop gems as "It's Got to Be Love," "Too Good for the Average Man," "There's a Small Hotel," "The Heart Is Quicker Than the Eye" and "Quiet Night." It's too bad that a click musical has to have a solid book to match brilliant lyrics and gorgeous music. We can only wonder why Maestro Abbott didn't perform his usual magic with that ailing libretto.

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**

October 12, 1954

THEATER

'On Your Toes'

By WALTER F. KERR

Requiem on 46th Street

I fear that the early October frost is upon us. After eighteen years away from Broadway, "On Your Toes" was bustled onto the stage of the 46th Street Theater Monday, presumably to stir up a fine fall breeze, put a little old-fashioned color in our cheeks, and remind us all what it was like to be a little younger.

Instead, it drifts across stage like an autumn ghost, eerie and echoing and cut from the bough. That its once joyous revelry should be so completely stilled is, as a matter of fact, something of a mystery. Every one expects a musical-comedy "book" to turn yellow and crisp to the fingers, and it's really no surprise to find the jokes running to remarks about Scranton and "Lady Macbeth from Minsky," or to hear the energetic soubrette calling an enormous fellow "Poopsy." So much can be borne, in the interests of higher things: lyrics by Larry Hart, impudent old-style music by Richard Rodgers, jazz ballets by Balanchine, direction by producer George Abbott.

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What is truly dumbfounding about the present revival is that even the higher things move gloomily under a cloud. Not that the lyrics have really faded: if you pay attention you will hear Larry Hart coining title-phrases like "The Heart Is Quicker Than the Eye," rhyming "the wife you must stick to" and "in flagrante delictu," and making mocking sense out of a reference to "mother's whistler."

You will also hear, and be happy to hum along with, Mr. Rodgers' "Small Hotel," "You Took Advantage of Me"—lifted from quite another show—and the wailing, wonderful strains of "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue."

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But you have to keep pinching yourself, and refocusing your eyes, each time one of these remembered treasures turns up. You have to keep telling yourself how much you like them, in or out of context—so powerful is the pall that the drowsy evening casts. Some ghoulish genie, enemy of all things theatrical, is at work from the outset. An opening vaudeville trio, sure-fire if anything was ever sure-fire, goes limp. A nicely-orchestrated choral salute to 'good' music turns inexplicably hollow. A no-holds-barred satire on classical ballet, intended as a slambang topper to the first act, finds little more humorous to do than have the principal male dancer tread on the haughty ballerina's toes. The second act is in the same unlooked-for trouble: one of those transformation scenes in which a casual backstage atmosphere turns into a dazzling onstage vision—and which can normally be counted on to get applause, if nothing else—is laboriously achieved to utter silence. Father Time has done a devastating job here.

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"On Your Toes" does get on them once or twice to good effect. Bobby Van dances an afterthought chorus of "The Heart Is Quicker" with exuberance. The chorus boys and girls do a racy tap number in a rainstorm. Vera Zorina moves with spidery grace through a raucous, still stimulating, rendition of the historic "Slaughter" ballet.

And Elaine Stritch deserves a paragraph, if not five or six more encores, all to herself. Screwing up her face into a grisly smile, she parts with the jokes on an at least even-steven, "no decision" basis. Given a couple of exuberant Rodgers tunes to lick, she hauls off mightily. Rocking her blonde curls back and forth, she makes hay with "The Heart Is Quicker." Later on, she does a deceptively wistful chorus of "You Took Advantage of Me" before throwing her low-slung lip, her glassy eye, her knee-joints, fingertips, and amiable hips at the tune. At one point she simply lounges on the proscenium and hoots, if that is the precise word for it. She is very good.

So is a vivacious dancer named Dorene Kilmer, in the few whirling moments she is on. But "On Your Toes" springs into the air too rarely. Mostly it just passes by, waving farewell.

New York Post

October 12, 1954

By Richard Watts Jr.

Revival of a Rodgers-Hart Show

"On Your Toes" is the Rodgers and Hart musical comedy perhaps chiefly remembered for a jazz ballet known as "Slaughter on 10th Avenue" and a song called "There's a Small Hotel." Revived last night at the 46th St. Theater by George Abbott, co-author of the book and director of the original production, this fairly celebrated show of 1936 is still notable mainly for the ballet, with Vera Zorina and Bobby Van dancing the roles created by Tamara Geva and Ray Bolger, and for quite a number of songs in a characteristically delightful score.

Despite its merits, "On Your Toes" never was one of my favorites among the works of Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, and I'm afraid it still isn't. But any musical comedy which has such songs as "It's Got to Be Love," "Too Good for the Average Man," "The Heart Is Quicker Than the Eye" and "On Your Toes" has a good head start toward anyone's attention, and, in addition, "You Took Advantage of Me," which has been taken over from an earlier Rodgers and Hart show called "Present Arms," has been added to enliven the second and better of the two acts.

The Book

The weakness, as so frequently happens in musical comedies by lesser men than the authors of "On Your Toes," is in the book. In the second act, it is wisely pretty much forgotten, but, in the opening section, there is quite a lot of it, and it just isn't as fresh and satirical as it wants to be. In some odd way, it seems at the same time both thin and obtrusive, and the humor doesn't appear as gayly satirical as it once did. Probably the idea of a conventional ballet company shocked at the idea of jazz on its program isn't exactly fresh any more.

When the show gets around to "Slaughter on 10th Avenue," it begins once more to assume its old-time distinction. Mr. Van, who is pleasantly reminiscent of Ray Bolger in appearance, and the lithe and handsome Miss Zorina dance it brilliantly, and George Balanchine has staged it admirably. A sizable number of jazz ballets have passed this way since it first appeared, but it still is something of a classic in its field, and the music Mr. Rodgers wrote for it continues to seem one of the major achievements of his career.

The Other Dances

At this point there is a confession I think I should make. Being considerably less than an advanced addict of the ballet, I sometimes have great difficulty in telling the difference between a number that is supposed to be satirical and one that is presumably done straight. This may possibly explain why a first-act ballet called "Princess Zenobia," which is clearly meant as satirical, didn't seem at all amusing to me. But I liked enormously the gay and imaginative dancing that accompanies the singing of the excellent title song.

Mr. Van and Miss Zorina not only dance splendidly but play their roles of a serious-minded ex-hoofer and a Russian dancer with ideas about sex with humor and attractiveness. Kay Coulter is unobtrusively charming as the ingenue of the proceedings, and there is helpful work by Ben Astar as the amiably pompous director of the ballet company and Joshua Shelley as a composer. Elaine Stritch caused the chief audience enthusiasm of the show when she sang "You Took Advantage of Me," but I was not among the chief applauders. There are other Rodgers and Hart shows I'd rather see revived than "Our Your Toes."

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 12, 1954

'On Your Toes' Revival Opens

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

In its final half hour, "On Your Toes" suddenly cooks up the sort of hot, tingling excitement that is musical comedy at its best. Before that, the revival at the 46th St. Theater is a now-and-then evening.

Even with a couple of big Balanchine ballets and a series of fond, lovely Rodgers and Hart songs, the show just sprawls. Perhaps the idea of kidding the ballet is a little old hat. Anyway, there is more book than story, until the very end. And there is an odd trick in the production of sacrificing audience reaction.

You find yourself clapping, when the people who did what you liked have disappeared.

The big fun begins when Elaine Stritch takes it into her head to do a specialty. She has been playing a lusty backer of the ballet, with some neat songs and wisecracks. Suddenly it is as if somebody had tipped her off that Judy Garland was singing "You Took Advantage of Me" in several Broadway houses at once in her "A Star Is Born."

A Show-Stopper.

Miss Stritch sings it, too, in a delightful parody of Johnny Ray and Ella Fitzgerald, not to mention Julie Wilson. She stops the show cold. This is a real joy.

After it comes the famous "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue," danced by Vera Zorina and Bobby Van in a style that heats up the theater considerably.

Before that Miss Zorina has wandered around looking exquisite and driving home her jokes with an archer's aim and a Russian accent. She also has taken part in the parody of a Russian Ballet, which somehow is not as funny as it once was.

Mr. Van is an engaging fellow, a sort of hoofing Mr. Peepers. He is a light and agile dancer, but he lacks the color to make up for the memory of Ray Bolger's eccentric and winning personality in the show's original run.

Varied Memories.

Kay Coulter is a pretty ingenue who takes pleasant care of several songs, and Joshua Shelley makes a lively composer. Nicolas Orloff has some fine moments as a conceited dancer.

For the rest, the memories the show leaves you with are varied. The big ballet where the chorus does tap and toe work at the same time is still startling and lively. Zorina lying on a couch blowing kisses at her own beloved feet is a sight both comical and lovely.

In the 18 years since "On Your Toes" was first done, its songs have become part of the night-club singer's manual. The audience began last night to applaud "Small Hotel" in the overture, and greeted the title song the same way.

"It's Got To Be Love" and "Glad To Be Unhappy" are deliciously familiar, and Miss Stritch has herself a fine time with the hilarious wisdom of "Too Good for the Average Man" and "The Heart Is Quicker Than the Eye."

Her advantageous "You Took Advantage of Me" was in a show called "Present Arms" in 1928. But as it serves Miss Garland with a half-million-dollar production number, it serves Miss Stritch every bit as well with no props at all but her voice and a sense of timing and humor.